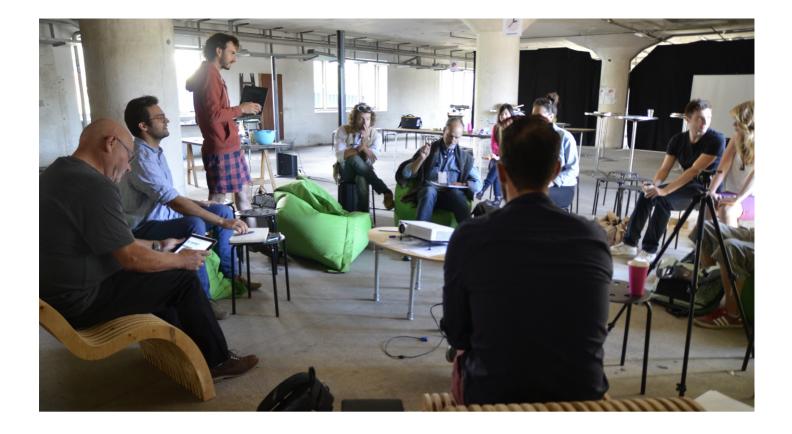# ko pen lab

GIVE IT AWAY AND GET RICH?

NOVEMBER 14, 2014 / COMMENTS OFF

A blog post inspired by the Science Drop "Openness and Profitability"

The International Community Manager at Open Knowledge Denmark Christian Villum, and a pioneer from the Danish 3D-printer community, Steen Nielsen, headed a discussion on how it is possible to make a profit and share knowledge openly at the same time.

The discussion started out by considering the incidence of an active maker, who has just started a company based on an idea of his, and is now considering what to do: Does he keep his trade secrets to himself, or are there incentives to share the product knowledge with the open knowledge community that he is a part of?

We were looking at the incentives for this. Being "in it" for the recognition is not only common among makers and hackers, it is also a foundation for creating a tech start-up with an active, contributing user-community and a strong brand. In certain fields based on reversed engineerable technologies, incentives can also include using openness to rapidly spread a product to foreign markets by hiring manufacturers, who under a patent regime would be deemed as infringers.

International Community Manager at Open Knowledge Denmark and open-everything activist Christian Villum says: "Open source software has proven great successes, as programming, hacking etc. in its nature is difficult to contain – software companies have realized value in openness and direct user co-creation and development".

Examples of the opposite exist: "Controversially, the 3D-printer manufacturing company Makerbot has moved to a closed model after having been rooted in the open source co-development community", Steen Nielsen explains.

Explaining the decision, Makerbot themselves cited future financial stability to fund develoment, avoiding unfruitful "carbon-copying" of their products and a move to being a "more professional" company (Rich Brown, C-NET.com 27.09.2012), while critics voice that Makerbot had a succesful market position via its openness and lost valuable community loyalty and damaged their brand by moving to a closed business model.

To make sure that the open source-status of products benefits the largest group of people possible, non-commercial licences seem to be useful in some cases:

"Unlicensed open source products and components can create a monopoly of bigger companies producing copies of components cheaper, and "vacuuming" the market for competing suppliers, thus completely taking over markets" Steen Nielsen pointed out and elaborated: "This has been seen for certain components popular in 3D-printers".

The Science Drop brought up key questions that future research and discussion may be able to answer:

1. To what extent are the positive effects of using open source business models depending on the size and competence of its associated maker/DIY community? This varies a lot among different industries.

2. How does investors view open source business models? What could secure investors' trust in the viability of these businesses?

3. Does a requirement of openness hinder scaling a company to certain size of market position? If so, is it desirable to hiner companies growth beyond a certain point? This seems to be a controversial question.

4. Does the propensity for working in an open source manner vary among different industries? If so, is this purely a matter of culture?

The complex topic of this science drop created rich discussions among the audience and speakers lasting much longer than the time alotted. The team behind Kopenlab hope that these discussions will continue in other fora in the future.

The Panelists were
Christian Villum, International Community Manager @ Open Knowledge Denmark and open-everything activist
Steen Nielsen, 3D Printing Denmark.
Chaired by Emil Polny, coordinator at Kopenlab Festival

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